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Autonomy and the Construction of Value

Vindicating Kantian Obligation

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Kant's ethical thought has always been criticized for its rigoristic aspects. Bernard Williams's well-known "one thought too many" or "the righteous absurdity" argument can be counted as a contemporary variation of these unsympathetic attitudes toward Kant. Williams objects that Kantian conception of "impartiality" or "universal morality" alienates our commitments to the personal ideals or the deep attachments which we feel to our important others. The principal aim of this paper is to vindicate Kantian conception of autonomy from Williams's accusation.

The fundamental thesis of this paper can be summarized as follows:

(1) Following Gerald Dworkin's idea, it is pointed out that the concept of "autonomy" should be distinguished from that of "freedom". The latter refers to the situation that an agent is not restricted to behave as he wishes to at certain time and place, or, at a local level, while the former demands that the agent's life-plan should not be interfered with at a global level. The concept of autonomy requires that an agent should be allowed to be the author of his own life, in the sense that he could create his way of living according to his own planning. That is, for an agent to be autonomous, he should be allowed to pursue his own significant purposes, or, the purposes of his own valuing.

(2) The structure of "freedom to the purposes of one's own valuing" can be interpreted to overlap with the structure of Kantian obligation, or, the theory of Kantian self-legislation. For, in order for an object of choice to be valuable, it has to be willed as an end of one's acting, or, has to be recognized as a normative object worth realizing, which implies that the value of object is conferred via the process of self-legislation, or, via the process of an agent's willing an object. In this sense, autonomous willing is functioning as a process of value construction.

(3) From above, it can be inferred that values would cease to exist if we refused to accept the concept of autonomy as an inherent structure of our normative experience. We have no choice but to admit autonomy if we are to make any sense of our value experience. In this sense, autonomy need not be regarded as the source of alienation. Rather, it should be conceived as a necessary condition of our agency, that is, the central and inevitable structure of value from which all other values arise.